

**They made their name as the couple behind Napa's acclaimed Eisele Vineyard, but then they sold it and got out of the wine business – for 24 hours. W Blake Gray hears their comeback story**  
Photos by Sarah Anne Risk

# What the Araujo did next



Bart and Daphne Araujo helped secure the reputation of one of Napa Valley's most vaunted vineyards, Eisele. Now they've started from scratch, with Accendo Cellars



The Araujos' second Napa project harnesses grapes bought in from a variety of sources, largely organically and biodynamically farmed



For 23 years, Bart and Daphne Araujo owned Eisele Vineyard, arguably the most vaunted vineyard in Napa Valley. And now they don't. Instead, they have a new winery, Accendo, where they make fine wine from vineyards they don't own, dotted around the valley, emulating both the approach and style of Napa winemakers of the 1970s. But while the vineyard sources are impeccable, none will ever have the pedigree of the one they sold.

During their time owning Eisele, the Araujos cemented its name in Napa folklore. They completely renovated the vineyard, replanting all the vines, which were threatened by phylloxera. Under the name Araujo Estate, they took all the production in-house. (Previously, grapes had been sold to third parties.) They switched to biodynamics back in 2000, a full decade before it became popular in the US, because some of their favourite French wines were farmed that way. And they brought in some of the valley's best consultants, including winemaker Tony Soter, organic farming pioneer Amigo Bob Cantisano, and biodynamics expert Jeff Dawson, all drawn by the reputation of the property. In short, they raised the site's status to the very top tier.

I meet them at their newish Wheeler Farms custom-crush winemaking facility in St Helena, at the heart of the Napa Valley, where their neighbours are Raymond Vineyards and Corison. This

is where, today, they make their Accendo wines. The Araujos are not hands-off owners; they took some of the money they made from selling Eisele and sunk it into the site, for which Daphne did the landscaping, placing the biodynamic gardens out front.

A professional landscape architect, Daphne wears working jeans and a gardener's straw hat, while Bart favours khakis and button-down shirts. The couple work well together, often chiming in with a point of agreement. They tell me how, back when they started out three decades ago, they gradually became viticultural experts simply by learning to listen to what the vines told them. Take biodynamics. 'We were always attacked for farming biodynamically because you can't scientifically prove any of this,' Bart Araujo recalls. 'In Calistoga, we always had two or three heat spikes, and our problem was sunburn on the berries. Maybe it's coincidence, but within a year of converting to biodynamics, we didn't have any sunburn. Also, we had a problem with mites on the Petit Verdot, but after we switched, the mites went away.'

Coincidence or not, under the Araujo's ownership, the Eisele wines shone. But after 20 years at the hallowed spot, Bart and Daphne were thinking about a succession plan. Both of their children had married and were living in Europe: daughter Jaime working as a marketing consultant to French wineries, son Greg as an oil trader. 'Shortly after Daphne and I acquired it, we realised we didn't really own the land,' Bart Araujo says. 'We were just stewards

of it. It was there before us, and it would be there after us. But we couldn't sell to a hedge fund or a Chinese billionaire. We had to leave it to someone who would do better with it than we did.'

That would be a tall order. Eisele Vineyard was already well regarded by aficionados in 1990, partly because of what lies beneath it: an alluvial fan of cobbly soils, special even in a region with good terroir. It lies east of the city of Calistoga in the north end of Napa Valley, at the foot of the Palisade Mountains. The weather is perfect, with plenty of California sun to ripen grapes and a cooling breeze from the Pacific Ocean that is funnelled through a gap between the mountains to the west. But the main source of its reputation was the wines produced from it, by various winemakers. The 1971 Ridge Eisele Vineyard Cabernet Sauvignon was one of California's first vineyard-designated wines (and the first to bear the Eisele name) and is still talked about today. Conn Creek's Eisele wines won similar acclaim, while Joseph Phelps made well-regarded single-vineyard Cabernets from the site for several years.

'While we never tasted these wines when they were first released, we did taste them 20 to 25 years after the vintage and found them to be consistently rich, complex, seamless and concentrated, with the finest tannins imaginable that carried into an exceptionally long, mineral finish,' Daphne says. 'The wines had a character that was immediately recognisable and unique.' By 1990, however, the vineyard was 'a dog's breakfast',

she says. Former owner Milt Eisele had worked for years to get recognition, offering his grapes at a discount if wineries would put the vineyard name on the label. But single-vineyard, non-estate wines were very rare back then – that's why Ridge made only one – and Eisele's labours were not profitable enough to keep up the vineyard's maintenance. It had a riot of different grape varieties, including Gamay, Chardonnay and Syrah, and some of the vines had been grafted over multiple times.

When the Araujos arrived in Napa, they had no wine background: he was a real-estate developer, she was a landscape architect. They attended the Napa Valley Wine Auction in 1989, and it turned out to be a life-changing experience. 'We thought it would be full of snooty people,' Daphne says. 'But everybody was so great and so welcoming. We came up the next month and started looking for a vineyard, but we were clear we didn't want a winery. We wanted to grow grapes so we'd be part of the valley, but we thought Bart would still do real estate and I would do landscape architecture. We looked at some properties, but we said we wanted something that was part of Napa Valley history.'

Milt Eisele wanted to sell and – through real estate broker Jean Phillips, who would go on to found Screaming Eagle two years later – had offered the vineyard to Phelps, who was still making wine from it. But Phelps turned it down, so Phillips offered it to the Araujos. They did their due diligence, which in this case meant



drinking wines made from the vineyard, and in 1990 they bought it. 'Later, Joe confided in me that it was the worst decision he'd made in his first 25 years,' says Bart.

The regret was only reinforced when Araujo immediately cancelled Phelps's grape contract. 'Then I looked it up and discovered Joe Phelps had the trademark for Eisele Vineyard,' Bart says. 'I called him, and Joe said, "Come over for breakfast."' They dined at Phelps's kitchen table and Phelps talked about the weather and the vintage while Bart felt his tension rising. Finally, he couldn't restrain himself any longer and asked what Phelps wanted for the trademark. 'It's yours,' Phelps said. 'Just promise me you'll always do the best for that property.' 'Joe ended up treating me like a wayward son,' says Araujo. 'He became a great mentor. Every bit of information he had about Eisele was available to me.'

Fast-forward 23 years to 2013. The Araujos thought they had a decade or more to solve their succession issue. Then, out of the blue, came an offer – from the son of France's third-richest man. François-Henri Pinault's luxury fashion group Kering controls an enviable portfolio of fashion brands that includes Gucci, Yves Saint-Laurent and Bottega Veneta. More significantly, he owns the auction house Christie's and several wineries in France, Château Latour and Clos de Tart among them. When Pinault, who is married to the actress Salma Hayek, goes shopping, he wants the best. Which is why he wanted Eisele Vineyard.

'All of a sudden, you have the perfect buyer at the wrong time,' Bart says. 'It was Château Latour. They have the history, and they are great with modern farming techniques, with biodynamics. They bought Château-Grillet, the legendary Rhône property, and they demonstrated a commitment to it. All the vineyard people are still there.' The Araujos decided to sell. With the sale, they ceded rights to the use of their name; they also had to move, because they lived on the vineyard. They bought a house in Oakville with an enormous, two-part garden – a particular passion for Daphne, who had tended a vegetable garden at Eisele. At their home today, they have melons, tomatoes, aubergines, blackberries, beans, tomatillos, apples, chillies ('Gotta have chillies,' says Bart), asparagus, raspberries and boysenberries, as well as a peach

orchard. They also have beehives to produce their own honey, and a garden for attracting beneficial insects.

Against such a backdrop, some might have been happy to garden, vacation and drink wine – not least because, after two full careers, the Araujos had reached what would for many be retirement age. The Araujos, though, are not the retiring type. 'Then the question was, what do we do now?' Bart says. 'We soon realised we had the opportunity to do it all again.'

Many winery sales include a non-compete clause, but Pinault decided not to include one, because, well, who can truly compete with Eisele Vineyard? In the event, the Araujos were out of the wine business for about 24 hours. 'The sale closed on the 26th, and I was calling friends and asking for grapes on the 27th,' Bart says. 'We really love what we do. We're able to work with incredible people.'

Having owned perhaps the single best vineyard in Napa Valley, they now have a completely different plan that harks back to the 1970s, when single-vineyard wines were still unusual. At that time, most of the best-regarded wines from Napa Valley were made from a variety of vineyards. Bart came to realise this through a programme at Press restaurant in St Helena. The renowned, wine-focused restaurant invited locals to sell the restaurant their old bottles of Napa Cabernet from their cellars. Because many wine-industry people in Napa have cellars at perfect temperature and humidity and had been trading wines with each other for years, the initiative unearthed dozens of gems. But they were quickly snapped up by locals and a few eagle-eyed visitors.

'Peter Mondavi didn't have any of his older wines; he went to Press to drink Charles Krug 1968,' Bart says. 'I tasted some of these old wines from the '60s and '70s and was amazed by the complexity.' That is the trade-off between a blend and a single-vineyard wine. The latter can show you the intrinsic qualities of a single site over time, but a blend has the advantage of bringing together complementary characteristics. At the low end, blends can cover up weaknesses in single-vineyard wines. When making an ambitious blend like Accendo (pronounced, says Daphne, 'like you're sneezing'), it can instead be a combination of strengths: a little brighter fruit here; a little minerality or fresh herb there.

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Above: night harvesting to avoid the Napa heat. Despite no longer owning any vineyards, the Araujos remain hands-on winemakers







Left: the couple's two children, Greg and Jaime, are now working full time at the estate, though Bart and Daphne have no plans to ride off into the sunset just yet

As they did at Eisele, the Araujos have assembled an all-star team, starting with Françoise Peschon, who was winemaker at Eisele for 20 years before becoming become a consultant; in 2019, the *San Francisco Chronicle* named her Winemaker of the Year. Accendo is just one of her clients, but ironically for a young brand, it's the one with which she has the most history. 'Bart likes to say Françoise is like having another wife,' Daphne says with a laugh. 'We've already had all of our arguments.' Unlike some winemaking consultants, Peschon does not have an identifiable style; she prefers to try to bring out the best of each vineyard she works with. Thus, Accendo holds particular interest for her. 'We're inspired by the classics of Bordeaux,' Peschon says. 'Wines that have elegance and restraint. There's an energy to these wines that's refreshing, that calls you back.'

The capacity at Accendo's winemaking facility was intentionally made to be more than they ever plan to need, and the facility is used by such winemaking titans as uber-consultant Philippe Melka and Tor Kenward of Tor Wines. 'Being at a custom-crush facility is like

being on a college campus,' Peschon says. Michel Rolland consults on each vintage; Peschon, a highly lauded winemaker herself, calls him a genius at blending. Steve Matthiasson has been consulting with on viticulture since 2006, when the Araujos attended a talk of his on irrigation; Nigel Kinsman, on winemaking, since 2010. Accendo Cabernet Sauvignon is the culmination of their efforts. They get their Cabernet from the well-regarded Vine Hill Ranch vineyard in Oakville, M-Bar Ranch in Oakville and Sleeping Lady Vineyard in Yountville, and they supplement it with Cabernet Franc and Petit Verdot from three other Napa Valley vineyards, including one on Diamond Mountain. The goal is to emulate the style of 1970s Napa Cabernets, which were as much about balance as power.

'Our overriding influence is European wine,' Bart says. 'We're not trying to make European wine; we're trying to make wines like the great wines from Europe that inspired us. We're shooting for elegance and balance. They're quieter.' They also make a Napa Valley Sauvignon Blanc that combines lots from Rancho Pequeño in Oakville and Ryan's Vineyard in the Oak

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Knoll District fermented in new oak barrels, used oak barrels, concrete eggs and stainless-steel drums. And just to increase the already noticeable complexity, it includes a small amount of Semillon, a frequent Sauvignon Blanc partner in Bordeaux that is rare in Napa Valley.

In 2019, Accendo made 3,000 cases of wine; it made no red wines at all in 2020 because of wildfires. Today, the Araujos' adult children are back home and working for the business: Jaime overseeing marketing, Greg on the management side. Their parents could have more free time now, but they never altered their typical vacation plan, which – pre-pandemic, at least – meant a multi-day hike. Their most recent was in the Dolomite Mountains; before that, it was Machu Picchu, New Zealand's Milford Track, the Cinque Terre on the Italian Riviera, and trails in Corsica and Piedmont. It doesn't sound much like a holiday, I observe. 'Well, it's a catered walk,' Daphne says. 'We stay in hotels. We're not backpacking. Usually it's five or more days of strenuous hiking and then a few days of R&R in Paris.'

Closer to home, I asked if they ever visit Eisele Vineyard now; it's only a few minutes' drive away, after all. 'No, it's theirs,' Daphne says. 'We visit the next-door neighbours a lot.' Bart reflects, 'I rarely look back. I'm always looking forward. It's like when I used to build houses. It's the biggest investment people ever make in their lives. We built them, somebody made an offer on them, and I took it and came back home.' Holding her hand over her heart, Daphne adds, 'The vineyard's in here. We visit it every day.' ○

*For a vertical tasting of Eisele Vineyard, see p.86.*

## The Accendo wines

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**Accendo Cellars Cabernet Sauvignon, Napa Valley 2016**

*Drink 2022–45*

For a wine assembled from six vineyards and including 15% Cabernet Franc and a dose of Petit Verdot, the most striking feature here is its delightful, seamless texture. Rather than noticing the components, I enjoyed the harmonious, graceful, lengthy nature of each sip. The considerable tannins are well behaved, making this approachable in its youth, but you might want to wait to see how this wine from Napa's best vintage of the past decade ages. There's no shortage of dark berry fruit that smells fresh-picked, but I wouldn't call this a fruit-driven wine. And while it's full-bodied, it doesn't slap you for attention. It's elegant and keeps bringing you back for another sip. 14.8%

£1,636 (case of six, in bond)  
Latimer Vintners

95

**Accendo Cellars Sauvignon Blanc, Napa Valley 2018**

*Drink 2021–25*

Napa has had some fiery vintages lately, but 2018 was smooth and peaceful. This wine is made from a standard Sauvignon Blanc clone, as well as the aromatic Sauvignon Musqué clone and a touch of Semillon. To further boost the complexity, it's fermented in new and used French oak, stainless steel and concrete eggs – and that pays off, because the longer you spend with it, the more interesting it gets. It opens with a burst of passion fruit and mango, then segues into a honeycomb character on a long, smooth finish. The expansive texture hints at the barrel-fermented components, but you don't actually taste any oak – and that's a good thing. Complex, yet subtle and elegant. 14.2%

£542 (case of 12, in bond)  
Latimer Vintners